Using Systems Theory to Understand the Identity of Academic Advising: A Case Study

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For decades, advising practitioners and scholars have worked toward developing an identity for advising as a unique field of scholarly inquiry and practice. To date, the identity crisis in advising remains. This study presents an examination and description of the function, purpose, and identity of a university advising system through comparisons of ideals espoused by advisors and administrators with practice. Based on systems theory as a framework, this study shows that the identity of academic advising can be misunderstood because of systemic issues. Addressing systemic flaws may help clarify the identity of academic advising within a specific system and possibly the field as a whole.

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Despite ongoing efforts to define academic advising, the field continues to lack a distinctive identity (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010). When examined from a systems perspective, *identity* is defined by emergent functions or purposes. Although scholars and practitioners attempt to define advising theory, philosophy, and policy to explain the way advising ought to be practiced, the purposes and identity of a system is best understood by system behavior, "not from rhetoric or stated goals" (Meadows, 2008, p. 11). Through a systems perspective, I examine and describe the functions, purposes, and identity of a university advising system in which the ideals are espoused by advisors and administrators who practice at a satellite campus of a large, public, multicampus university.

Examination from the perspective of systems theory provides a holistic view of advising. Understanding a particular system in this way illuminates the strengths and weaknesses of the system as related to the mission and goals put forth by the advising community. This study contributes to the understanding of advising because it reveals information about the way advising functions. To date, all published accounts of advising theory, philosophy, and research described construction of normative theories from a reductionist perspective. Systems theory provides a new alternative to scientific reductionism for understanding academic advising (Banathy, 1996b; Checkland, 1981).

Researchers of advising have borrowed ideas from the social sciences and student development theory (Hagen, 2005; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010). Since the late 1990s, advisors have pushed to engage in scholarship with the purpose of developing a "professional, academic identity" (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010, p. 24). As a result, a few dominant paradigms have emerged and shaped current theory and practice; however, these frameworks also contributed to an indistinct identity of advising programs at institutions of higher education (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). For example, in his landmark study, Crookston (1972/2009) drew a distinction between developmental and prescriptive advising. He described developmental advising as concerned with the intellectual, psychosocial, and moral development of a student whereas prescriptive advising amounts to form signing and paper pushing. In the significant aspect of his work, Crookston argued that advising can and should serve as an important educative enterprise. Despite the long-term dominance as the advising paradigm in higher education, the developmental advising model has drawn considerable criticism from the advising community.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, researchers began publishing questions about the developmental model as an adequate description of good or ideal advising practice is and should be (Hagen, 2005; Hemwall &Trachte, 2005, Lowenstein, 2005). In particular, Lowenstein (2005) argued for learning-centered advising (p. 71) primarily concerned with student learning, and he also suggested that excellent advising looks much like excellent teaching. This notable challenge shifted the paradigm from developmental advising to teaching and signaled the emergence of other thought leaders in the field.

Hagen (2005) observed that academic advising research need not be solely based on positivist epistemology. He explained that the way that scientists come to know and make meaning of

phenomena does not encompass all ways to make knowledge claims about advising; rather, advising scholars also employ hermeneutics (the study of interpretation), rhetoric, philosophy, narrative theory, and other ways of knowing. Hagen (2005) encouraged practitioners to renew their thinking about advising: "Once the metaphorical leap is made to view the student before you as a 'text,' then all of the truth claims of hermeneutics become available for your use" (p. 5). The literature suggested that advisors, who come from a wide range of academic disciplines, tap into the wisdom gained from their own fields and experiences to build theories unique to academic advising (Hagen, 2005; Lowenstein, 1999, 2005; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). Musser (2006) offered an example of a new approach in her description of the used-systems theory as a construct to extend the understanding of academic advising.

Musser (2006) established a foundational understanding of the ways systems thinking applies to advising. However, little else appears in the literature about advising in this context. Further study of college advising systems may reveal emergent patterns in higher education systems. In advocating for a systems examination, Banathy (1996a) suggested that

> people . . . cannot give direction to their lives, they cannot forge their destiny, they cannot take charge of their future unless they also develop competence to take part directly and authentically in the design of the systems in which they live and work, and reclaim their right to do so (p. vii).

In her keynote address at the NACADA Region 2 Conference, Schulenberg (2010) challenged advisors to take the lead in such reflection. Musser's work was an important first step in using systems theory to understand advising; this study continued this investigation.

Research Questions

RQ1. How do administrators, faculty members, students, and staff perceive the purposes and functions of the advising system at a specific university?

RQ2. What discrepancies, if any, characterize the espoused objectives, policies, procedures, and processes related to advising and the ways they are enacted on a satellite campus of a large, multicampus university?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on systems theory, which is an area of inquiry through which one attempts to understand the wholeness of scientific and social problems. It speaks to "a constant yearning for understanding the wholeness of the human experience" throughout human history (Banathy & Jenlink, 2004, p. 40). In Western science, the quest to understand wholeness began as early as Plato, continued through the Enlightenment, and persists today. The systems movement has been the driving force in understanding the wholeness of scientific inquiry since the 1950s (Checkland, 2000).

Scholars of systems theory maintain that all problems in the sciences (physical and social) are fundamentally systemic in nature (Hutchins, 1996; Meadows, 2008, Wheatley, 2006). Systems theory is used to explain problems holistically, which differs from the way in which Western science is traditionally applied. To wit, Banathy (2006b) asserted that, because science became so specialized since the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, many investigators are "encapsulated in their private universe" (2006, para. 5). Since Descartes, scientists have solved scientific problems by breaking them apart and continually reducing them into increasingly smaller pieces. The scientific method and the practice of isolating and manipulating variables in controlled environments compose the essence of traditional scientific inquiry.

This cornerstone of scientific inquiry, the assumption that problems can be broken into parts, causes practitioners of the method to overlook the interactions and relationships between the parts; that is, they do not consider wholeness. Checkland (1981) argued that "systems thinking . . . starts from noticing the unquestioned Cartesian assumption: namely that a component part is the same when separated out as when it is part of the whole" (p. 12). Furthermore, systems theory does not exclude the method and practice of traditional science, but builds upon it. Systems theory shows the scientific method as valid but incomplete.

Systems theory complements, rather than excludes, traditional science. To use an analogy, if scientific inquiry is used to examine phenomena under a microscope, those employing systems theory apply a wide-angle lens to see them. Systems theory offers researchers a means to understand phenomena in a fundamentally different way than does scientific inquiry; the former is based on philosophical assumptions that differ

significantly from those that underpin traditional science.

Two tenets of systems theory prove particularly relevant to clearing up any confusion about the purpose and identity of academic advising. First, complex social systems do not serve a single purpose (Hutchins, 1996). According to Hutchins (1996), individual ideas on the purpose of a system differ such that a meaningful purpose cannot be attached to it. Furthermore, systems usually accommodate more than one purpose. Currently, the purpose of a college degree can vary depending on the point-of-view of the person asked about it. For instance, a business leader might believe that a college education prepares students for the workforce, a professor might think that it represents the process of people learning to think critically to avoid being manipulated by power brokers (e.g., business leaders). Many universities were founded to carry out research, economic, service, or other functions. In any case, the observer of the system defines the purposes of it.

The second principle of systems theory, that one must understand the ways the purposes of a system are realized to understand the system, also applies to advising. Of course, these realizations are based on the subjective definitions of the purposes. In addition, the underlying purpose of any living system, including a social system, is survival. One must acknowledge these assumptions when identifying purposes and determining the way they are achieved within a system.

System purposes are achieved through control mechanisms commonly called balancing or reinforcing *feedback loops*. A balancing loop maintains stability in a system, and a reinforcing loop either increases or decreases the effect of incoming information. A thermostat in a heating system acts as a balancing loop because it keeps the temperature of an area within a preset range. An electric amplifier, such as used for a guitar, amplifies sound, so it acts as reinforcing loop, but a damper is used to attenuate vibrations of the strings and thus acts as a negative reinforcing loop. These same feedback loops apply for modifying behaviors.

These control mechanisms do not produce immediate effects on systems; that is, responses may be delayed. For example, when a thermostat on a home heating system is set at 68 degrees, the furnace often continues to run such that the temperature overshoots the setting by a few degrees before the furnace shuts down. In most physical or relatively closed systems, feedback delays can be relatively short, but in social systems, which are relatively open, delays in feedback may take decades. Because of these large response times, changes made in a system can lead to counterintuitive consequences.

Research Methodology

I used a case study strategy to collect qualitative data. According to Yin (2003), a case study can be used to better understand "contextual conditions—believing that they may be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study" (p. 13) Because one can only understand systems in context, the case study methodology proved an appropriate approach. I triangulated four data sources to increase reliability and transparency, and I (a) reviewed extant documents from Mid-Atlantic University (MAU) (pseudonym), (b) conducted semi-structured interviews with selected staff and administrators associated with advising, (c) facilitated one focus group with a retention committee at the satellite campus, and (d) facilitated another focus group with undergraduates at the satellite campus. The data were analyzed using an inductive approach and interpreted through the lens of systems theory.

This study was conducted primarily at a satellite campus of MAU, a large public university with more than 90,000 students and over a dozen campuses distributed across one state. All of the locations, including the main campus, operate under the same advising policies and procedures. However, the management in one centralized unit, the School of General Studies (SGS) oversees academic administration of the campuses. MAU's foundational advising documents, such as the *Advising Handbook* and Faculty Congress policy papers, were intended to ground practice at MAU regardless of advisor location; however, leadership in each place enjoys independence to operate within the established advising policies and takes responsibility to implement advising under the umbrella MAU policy. The geographic distribution of the campuses creates mini-laboratories where the espoused ideals of academic advising have been adapted to practice at each satellite campus.

Data were collected in two phases. Phase 1 goals primarily included building rapport, gaining permission, gathering documents for analysis, and identifying participants for the study. Creswell (2007) emphasized the importance of building rapport with gatekeepers at research sites, especially prior to case study research. Phase 2 included specific data collection and analysis.

During Phase 1, I gathered and analyzed data from the MAU academic advising policy, web sites

of the Academic Advising Board, and the Council of Deans to determine the objectives, policies, and procedures of the advising system.

Phase 2 of data collection consisted of 16 semi-structured one-on-one interviews and two focus groups. Participants from both the main and satellite campuses were interviewed. At the satellite campus, the interviewees included

- 5 faculty advisors;
- 3 administrators, the Campus Dean, the Associate Dean of Academics, the Associate Dean of Admissions;
- 3 professional staff, the Registrar, the Director of Financial Aid, the Director of Advising; and
- 1 support staff member.

The interviews at the main campus were conducted with the

- Current Dean of Advising,
- Retired Dean of Advising,
- Associate Dean of Advising, and
- Administrative Director of the School of General Studies (who oversees all academic programming at the satellite campuses).

The first focus group consisted of students at a satellite campus. To maximize variability of students in the focus group, I obtained a list of 200 randomly selected students from the Campus Registrar. I subsequently contacted each by e-mail. One student responded, and he was ultimately unable to participate. As a result of this difficulty in recruitment, I invited students via social media and asked students in the campus dining hall to participate; from these efforts, 4 students agreed to an interview. Two students were advised by faculty members who only advise students intending to complete degrees at the main campus. One student was advised by a professional advisor. One participant was advised by a faculty member who teaches in the satellite campus 4-year program in which the student was enrolled. Thus, a total of 4 students participated in the focus group.

During the course of the data collection process, I learned of a campus committee created to help increase retention rates. Participants suggested that the people from this committee might offer appropriate data for this study. Staff from throughout the campus served on this committee, and they all interacted with the academic advising system because of the nature of their work. Therefore, in addition to the Director of Advising, the other focus group consisted of staff from the offices of Residence Life, Financial Aid, Athletics, Bursar, and Learning Support.

To identify the stated objectives and policies related to academic advising, I read, summarized, and paraphrased the policies to protect the identity of the institution. To identify similarities and differences between data from the participants and the way that advising is defined in policy, I compared the summarized policies to the data collected from the interviews and focus groups. I interpreted the data through the lens of systems theory using Hutchins's (1996) principles of systems theory.

Reliability and Validity

In positivist research, investigators measure reliability to determine whether a repeated study is expected to yield the same results as found the first time it was conducted. According to Merriam (1988), "Reliability in the traditional sense seems to be something of a misfit when applied to qualitative research. . . . That is, rather than demanding that outsiders get the same results, one wishes to concur that, given the data collected, the results make sense—they are consistent and dependable" (p. 170). Because the purpose of qualitative research is to "describe and explain the world as those in the world interpret it" and "reliability and validity are inextricably linked," qualitative researchers can establish reliability by establishing internal validity (Merriam, 1988, p. 171). For qualitative research, one can use one of several methods to establish internal validity, and for this study, I used data triangulation and member checking.

Through member checking, I attempted to confirm the interpretations of the data with those from whom the data were gathered. Member checking can help clarify meaning and minimize misunderstanding between a researcher and a participant. The researcher engages in ongoing member checking throughout the data collection phase of the study (Merriam, 1988).

To ensure reliability for case study designs, a researcher not associated with the initial study must be able to undertake the same case study and obtain similar results to the original research. To ensure that the original and any follow-up studies remain identical and accurate, errors and biases must be minimized in the first investigation (Yin, 2003). To meet these goals for reliability, the

researcher must carefully document the procedures and develop a case study protocol.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis in descriptive case study research are conducted simultaneously and continuously; that is, the data collection and analysis phases are undertaken at the same time and build on each other. During the course of data collection and analysis, research questions are commonly refined, and data collection strategies are often changed during the study as new information emerges. In this study, the research questions did not need to be refined.

According to Yin (2009), four strategies can be employed in analyzing case study data. In the most appropriate strategy for this study, ''developing a case description'' (p. 131), the researcher describes the findings within the context of a specific theoretical framework. Yin (2009) advocated for this approach when ''the original and explicit purpose of the case study [is] a descriptive one'' (p. 131).

All one-on-one and focus group interviews were recorded with a digital audio recording device. A transcription service transcribed the audio recordings. Using Nvivo 10 (QSR International, 2014), all interview data were coded using a two-step process. During the first step, I coded data to correspond to the research questions for this study. Then, I used open coding to identify themes and subthemes that emerged within the data.

The categories established were *purposes of advising* and *function of advising*. The categories were divided into the components of Hutchins's (1996) framework for systems theory to (a) describe the aspects of the advising system, (b) explain the way components of the system interact, (c) determine whether the system is effective and the reasons for it working as intended, and (d) identify the extent to which the system functions in practice compared to the ideal as articulated in archival documents.

Limitations of the Study

Because of the qualitative nature of this study, the findings are not generalizable, which makes up the primary limitation of the research. In addition, because of time and financial resource restrictions, only one satellite campus and specific offices on the main campus were studied. Also, I had professional relationships with some participants at both sites, and although these connections enabled me to gain access to the sites and obtain the cooperation of administrators, the participants may have responded differently than they would with interviewers they did not know. To control for this potential of participants to answer guardedly or incompletely, researchers must build trust with the participants and create a safe, nonjudgmental environment for honest sharing.

Other limitations relate to participant response. Only four students volunteered to participate. In addition, every faculty advisor who participated reported that they value academic advising. Participation from faculty advisors who do not value advising may have added other dimensions to the data.

Findings

The data collected in this study suggest discrepancies between the way that the MAU advising system is designed to work, as articulated in documented policies, and the way in which it functions as reported by participants. Faculty members, students, staff, and administrators indicated that they perceive a misunderstanding among those in the campus community about the purposes and functions of academic advising. The sole professional advisor at the satellite campus and advising administrators at the main campus expressed a shared understanding of the purposes of advising and the way that the advising system was designed to function, and they acknowledged that the system does not function the way it was intended.

The university-wide academic advising policy was passed by the MAU Faculty Congress in the 1970s, and it has been revised several times. Part of the policy defines the purposes of academic advising. Section 1 states the purposes of academic advising:

- help students to set and achieve academic goals,
- promote intellectual development and learning in and out of the classroom, and
- encourage independent learning and academic decisions.

These purposes suggest that the university leans toward using a developmental or learning-centered approach to academic advising rather than a predominantly prescriptive model.

Among the participants, academic advisors and advising administrators expressed the deepest understanding of the purposes of academic advising, and their reported perceptions of the purposes

of advising most closely aligned with the stated MAU goals and those reflected in the advising literature. For example, they spoke frequently about the centrality of advising in a student's educational experience and the ways that advising can help students make connections between courses and across the curriculum, which are associated, in general, with a learning-centered or developmental advising model. Although faculty advisors, nonadvising administrators, and other staff also acknowledged that advising entails more than scheduling, their views became evident only in response to probing questions about it. Themes that emerged from their immediate responses were keeping students on track to graduate on time, retention, and career advising. All participants were concerned about the low retention rates at MAU. The Director of Advising stated that "it all comes back to enrollment." The budget is based on total enrollment, so when enrollment is down, administrators feel pressure to increase retention rates.

Professional advisors and advising administrators also discussed the importance of the role of advisors with regard to retention and degree completion, but their responses were nuanced. They spoke of the importance of those issues as well as concerns about student debt with regard to time to completion. However, advisors considered these functions as byproducts of good advising rather than as the primary purposes of advising. One main campus advising administrator put it this way:

> In my view, I think the purpose of academic advising is to facilitate students' planning and executing a meaningful education. And that's it. Underneath that a whole bunch of other very complex things. But fundamentally, it's about students being intentional about their education and being aware of the opportunities and making decisions that mean something to them. That's really it.

> I spent a lot of time thinking about what it is we're supposed to be accomplishing, how we change students' lives, how we could, over the long-term, by changing individual students' lives have an impact on our higher education institutions, on society and other things like that. I actually think it sounds ridiculous maybe, but I see a connection between what we do with an individual who can say, "I learned these things and this is what's important to me and this is why my higher education was valuable." Regardless of the job they have or whatever, if they could say "this is why this was valuable," then they raise kids in a different way. And they make voting decisions in a different way. And we can change the rhetoric of what it is to have an educated citizenry. But, one person at a time. Seeing the meaning in what they did, but it wasn't just jumping through hoops and checking things off a list.

The Director of Advising at the satellite campus had a view of academic advising similar to that of the administrator at the main campus, and she identified the primary purpose of advising as teaching. She emphasized that academic advisors play a key role in helping students engage in their educational endeavors. Although she explicitly stated that the purposes of advising are teaching and student engagement, during her elaboration, the Director consistently stated that retention was ultimately a function of academic advising at the campus. The following quotes from the Director of Advising capture this sentiment:

- "The more engaged we know our students are, the more likely we are to retain them."
- "I think if that engagement from the advisor was effective with every student in that, it would certainly help with retention."

Concluding her thoughts about the purposes of advising on campus, the Director of Advising admitted that retention remained the primary goal, reflecting the position of the nonadvising staff and administrators at the satellite campus. Although the Director of Advising understood the ideals of advising as professed by policy and advising administrators at the main campus, the pressures of enrollment and retention resulted in advising being viewed primarily as a retention tool at the satellite.

Similar to the verbiage from the Director of Advising, faculty advisors at the satellite campus discussed the importance of advising for encouraging students to engage and to make meaning of their curriculum; the message comported with that from main campus advising administrators and advising policy. However, the advisors placed greater emphasis on advising as a retention tool

than on the stated policy. One faculty advisor's view encapsulated the sentiments of the others. He described advising as a two-sided coin, with one side being mechanical and the other side being philosophical. He explained that the mechanical side shows concern for timely completion of degree requirements and course scheduling and that the philosophical side shows concern for helping students connect their course selections to their academic and career goals, as articulated in MAU statements. Crookston (1972/2009) and others delineated these sides as prescriptive versus developmental versus learning-centered advising (Crookston 1972/2009; Hagen & Jordan, 2008; Lowenstein, 2005). Despite the admitted importance of the philosophical side, the mechanical (prescriptive) side remains the focus of the advising practice at MAU. As the faculty advisor summarized: "So I think the theoretical and the philosophical stuff is more important, but we don't focus on it."

When asked the reason that he was unable to focus on the philosophical aspect of advising, the faculty advisor stated that students come to advising appointments unprepared; that is, he claimed that they typically expect the advisor to tell them the classes they need to graduate and to build their course schedules. Furthermore, he noted that, in most cases, students do not want to have more philosophical discussions. Another academic advisor expressed similar concerns and frustrations with the advising process:

> Well, I see advising as to help lead students, but I think students see it as doing it for them. That's something, especially because I have so many advisees that I do get frustrated with. I think a lot of the times the students could do a lot of this on their own, and they just need confirmation that they're going about it the right way, but many of the students, for whatever reason, just come in and expect you to do it for them. That's something I've been working with, trying to give them more ownership over their degree.

> For a lot of students it's very mechanical: "What are the courses that I need to graduate? Who teaches it? What time is it at? What days are they at? Do I have friends who are in that course?" I think for a lot of students that's all that matters to them. In the degree [I advise for] we do have 12 credits of what's called *consultation* with advisor that are courses; I call it kind of a mini minor, courses that enhance the degree but aren't required for the degree. I try to get them to consider content. What kind of courses fit together in that picture, but for a lot of students they're just not interested in that.

Because of their other responsibilities, most faculty advisors cannot take the time or expend the energy to turn students away with instructions to come back after they have prepared for the meeting. The time crunch, coupled with students' little interest in discussing the philosophical side of advising, results in advising appointments that almost always focus on the mechanical aspects of advising.

Of the four students who participated in the focus group, three were planning to finish their degrees at the main campus, and one planned to complete his degree at the satellite campus. These students also worked with different types of advisors. One student was advised by the Director of Advising; the student intending to graduate from the satellite campus was advised by a faculty member who teaches in the student's declared program; and two students were advised by faculty members responsible for advising students who intend to complete degrees at the main campus. These students were enrolled in different majors, and therefore, had different advisors.

The student advised by the Director of Advising very vocally spoke about the high quality of advising she received. Her advisor was very helpful in a number of ways, including in interpreting academic policy, in understanding her own strengths, and by suggesting courses to help enhance her education. The student enrolled in the satellite campus degree program had a similar experience with his program faculty advisor. He stated, "I don't think I've asked a question that she didn't . . . she wasn't able to find the answer or give me the right direction or anything like that."

One of the students who planned to complete his degree on the main campus described a very different experience than the advisees of the Director of Advising and the program faculty member. He explained the reasons for displeasure with his interaction with his assigned advisor: "I haven't had much advising experience. Recently I had to drop a class and add another one, but my advisor had like zero answers. I e-mailed her, and

she was just like, 'I don't know what to do; go talk to this person,' and that was pretty much the base of my advising."

Discussion

The two tenets of systems theory provide a useful framework for helping understand the identity of a system. The first tenet addresses the multiple purposes of complex social systems (Hutchins, 1996), which are defined by the subjective interpretation of the people in the system.

Purposes of Advising as Reported by Professionals

The nonstudent participants interviewed for this study reported multiple purposes for the advising system. They mentioned sustaining retention, enrolling students in proper courses at the correct time, teaching life skills, career advising, and helping students with course selection and making the most of their education.

Despite espousing similar purposes for advising, professional advisors and nonadvising staff and administrators expressed very different views about the purposes of academic advising. Professional advisors see course selection, major choice, and keeping students on track as by-products of advising. Administrators and the professional advisor at the satellite campus did not mention retention as a purpose of advising; however, when asked about the purposes of advising, the administrators and nonadvising staff at the satellite campus clearly prioritized retention and keeping students on track to reach their goals. Professional advisors never mentioned career advising as a purpose of the advising system, but faculty advisors, nonadvising staff, and administrators reported it.

The faculty advisors interviewed reported a desire to address more philosophical issues related to advising and to spend less time on advising mechanical in nature. The advising literature characterizes the mechanical and philosophical goals as prescriptive and developmental advising, respectively (Crookston, 1972/2009). If they could prioritize philosophical aspects, advisor practice would align more closely with the advising goals as stated in MAU policy. Because students typically do not prepare for appointments, the advising sessions are dominated by mechanical issues, such as checking degree requirements and building semester schedules. With the electronic tools available (degree audits, eight-semester plans, and the university catalog), students should be relatively certain about the courses they need to take, how to schedule them, and those that satisfy specific requirements. Ironically, these tools were developed and provided to students so that advisors would have more time to discuss philosophical issues.

The system glitch for professional and faculty advisors stems from keeping a busy schedule and thus not turning away inadequately prepared students and insisting they return only after preparing for the meeting. In addition, the pressure to retain students seems to result in a customer-service mentality through which the advisors feel discomfort in holding students accountable. Advisors reported that, in some cases, students do not demonstrate the ability to complete basic tasks, such as keeping a day planner. One advisor reported that she spends significant time teaching students basic skills. While such training tangentially relates to the purpose of helping students to engage in their education, efforts dedicated to tutoring on practical tasks prevent advisors from helping students develop intellectually, stated as a very important part of advising in the literature and university policy.

Misperceptions about advising held by satellite campus administrators and nonadvising staff can contribute to student misperceptions. For example, a student who receives a class-selection or scheduling referral from an authority figure who views scheduling as a prescriptive advising exercise might expect to receive only a list of appropriate courses from the advisor. As a result of erroneous presumptions about advising by those making the referrals, students might neither anticipate nor engage in the kind of reflective process with an advisor that leads to the best possible course-related decisions. This can result in the student having unfulfilled expectations and leaving an advising appointment feeling that the advisor was not helpful. Furthermore, these misunderstandings result in primarily prescriptive, rather than developmental or learning-centered, advising contrary to MAU policy.

The faculty advisors, administrators, and nonadvising staff showed no familiarity with the advising literature and demonstrated little understanding of the deep learning that the advising policy advances. This lack of information stems from dearth of formal training about the theory and philosophy of advising. More problematic, nonadvisors and campus administrators reported

advising purposes as more related to other functional areas, such as career services and learning support, than as helping students to set academic goals, achieve intellectual development and learning, or engage in independent learning and academic decision making.

In one of the most common responses, advisors expressed the need to help students think about careers and choose majors that lead to certain careers. The participants mentioned purposes more consistent with learning-centered or developmental advising only when they were directly asked about these purposes. In response to the inquiry, the advisors agreed to the importance of learning-centered or developmental advising, but never offered goals of these practices as purposes for advising despite elements of these approaches embodied in the published MAU advising policy.

Effect of Reinforcing Loops on Advising

Musser (2006) explained Hutchins's eighth principle of systems theory: "Understanding how a system achieves its purpose(s) is essential to understanding the system of interest" (p. 101). Advising purposes are achieved because some advisors enjoy working toward the related goals. Faculty members at the satellite campus who do not enjoy working on these priorities do not need to advise or advise well because they are evaluated only on the number of advisees assigned to them.

As confirmed by one of the student participants and the Campus Dean, students learn the identity of good advisors via word of mouth. They seek the help of these good advisors rather than those to whom they are assigned. This student behavior results in the effective advisors seeing more students than the advisors to whom students were assigned. According to one faculty advisor, she has 70 advisees officially assigned to her but she advises close to 120 students. In systems theory, this is called a reinforcing loop; in the reality of this overloaded advisor, it is called "good advising equals more advising" as stated by the Director of Advising.

Another reinforcing loop from the system dynamic of self-selecting good advisors means that weak advisors to do less advising than expected. This negative reinforcing loop reinforces nonadvising priorities. For instance, formal incentives for the faculty are based on research, so as one faculty advisor noted, "[If] you are not advising you are [doing less work], and then you have more time to do your research . . . in some way you're being rewarded because you do not want to advise." The tenure-track faculty members teach three courses per semester so that they can dedicate more time to conduct research. The faculty members who do not enjoy advising are thus incentivized to practice less-than-excellent advising because students will seek out others deemed better, thereby allowing the uninterested advisors more time to research. These two reinforcing loops, the positive one in which student access is increased and the negative one through which research faculty members avoid some advising responsibilities, characterize the means by which the advising system operates.

Because of multiple demands on faculty advisors, the increased time spent on advising by good advisors counters their ability to discuss the philosophical topics encouraged by advising policy. Compounding that dynamic, as explained by faculty advisors, many students arrive to appointments expecting their advisors to tell them the classes to take, keep track of their degree completion, and build schedules suitable to them.

Retention as the Primary Goal of Advising

The emphasis on retention and keeping students on track for graduation overrides advising topics identified in the MAU policy, and hence, persistence often becomes the only subject discussed during an appointment. All study participants voiced concern about low retention rates at the campus because enrollments affect the budget. The campus Director of Advising concluded that "it all comes back to enrollment."

Advising issues that bubble up to the administration typically originate when a student perceives that the advisor has made a mistake regarding course selection (despite a policy that clearly states students take responsibility for course selection). Because administrators get involved with advising only when complaints surface, the message that the purpose of advising primarily involves keeping students on track for graduation—retention—is reinforced. This reinforcing loop keeps the focus on retention over other important purposes.

Ironically, the university invests considerable resources to provide students with the tools they need to ensure that they complete their educational plans to graduation. Academic advisors from the Advising College took the responsibility, with encouragement from the Academic Advising

Board, to build 4-year semester plans for each of the 160 majors at the university. In addition, the student information system includes a degree audit function, which generates a report of a student's academic record compared against any degree that he or she has expressed interest in completing. Furthermore, the university has dedicated much time and great attention to develop and maintain various web sites with advising information for students and advisors alike. The advising policy clearly states that students must take ultimate responsibility for scheduling the proper courses and checking their own educational progress; the tools described were created to aid in their self-management. If students were truly held responsible for their own progress such that they came prepared for appointments, then advisors could spend more time discussing the philosophical issues that can make advising the rich educational endeavor that the policy and advising literature define as the purposes advising.

Because advising is not formally evaluated or assessed, advisors receive feedback about advising only when a student complains, which reinforces any anxiety about making mistakes. Because of all of the dynamics in the advising system, the primary purpose of advising at the satellite campus has emerged as prescriptive advising such that it effectively serves as the primary function of advising for many faculty members, staff, and students.

Implications of the Study

According to higher education researchers, academic advising makes up an essential component for undergraduate education and student success (Kuh, 1997, 2010; Light, 2001; Lowenstein, 2005; Schulenberg, 2010; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2010; White & Schulenberg, 2012). White and Schulenberg (2012) explained:

> Contemporary higher education faces increasing pressure from external sources to demonstrate accountability. As support for higher education dwindles at public institutions, and as every program, service department and unit may be asked to justify its existence; the activity of academic advising is not exempt from these pressures. With no one (or thing) to replace the staff academic advisor, with faculty advisors stretched to their limits not only with advisees but with teaching and research responsibilities as well, with technology not able to respond to the "human needs" components of advising, academic advising finds itself surviving within an environment of diminishing student resources . . . and ironically, with greater student demands for contact. (pp. 16–17)

With rising tuition, low employment rates for recent college graduates, and disinvestment of public higher education, the need for advisors is increasing. White and Schulenberg (2012) stressed the importance of advising assessment to demonstrate to administrators that advising is worth the investment. A rigorous assessment program must be included as a crucial component in any advising system for determining whether advising goals are accomplished.

To reach academic advising goals, all personnel associated with an advising system must be educated about the theory and philosophy of advising so that they can understand the critical purposes of advising. If the people who interact with the system do not deeply internalize the goals of the system, they will unlikely act in accordance with the goals. Academic advisors must take responsibility for the way that they practice advising. The necessary self-assessment and improvement rely on measurable outcomes and proper training so advisors can be held accountable for outcomes that are defined and explained; expectations for advising outcomes without proper training or explanation would prove untenable.

Moreover, in this advising system study, advisors deemed "good" by students see more advisees than advisors without a positive reputation for advising. The two themes related to this, "good advising equals more advising" and "advising enables the weak to avoid advising" create particularly problematic reinforcing loops because they reward unwanted behavior by enabling poor advisors to see fewer students while earning the same credit for advising as those who are deemed effective, who often receive overwhelming increased advising workloads.

This unfair situation for good advisors also harms students. As one student stated, "I think if I had a helpful advisor like that I'd feel comfortable going to them to help me schedule, but after what happened the first semester, like, I know I scheduled my second semester all by myself." In other words, this student has decided to stop seeking the help of his advisor because of his experience with an advisor who did not want to

advise. Faculty members, staff, and administrators demonstrated keen awareness of these issues, yet they persist, and likely these dynamics affect other universities as well. If university leadership seriously wishes to provide high quality advising, then policies, assessment strategies, and incentives must be closely examined to ensure that the advising system is designed to facilitate practice consistent with policy.

Summary

More than 40 years after Crookston (1972/2009) penned his seminal article, which was the first to suggest that advising consists of more than prescriptive tasks, those dedicated to the field of academic advising still struggle to establish a distinct identity. The quest for normative advising theory may prove of limited utility in practice because the context of the university determines the true identity of advising at any specific institution. Prescribing ideal functions, purposes, or goals of advising, although noble endeavors, must be designed by universities such that the goals can be realized within the systems in place.

MAU proved an excellent example of the mismatch between policy and practice. Advising scholars and practitioners generally agree on the superiority of a developmental or learning-centered advising model over predominately prescriptive paradigms (Lowenstein, 1999, 2005; White & Schulenberg, 2012). MAU has committed tremendous human and financial resources to not only advocate for academic advising that goes beyond prescriptive functions but also to support the scholarship of advising by encouraging staff to write about advising, attend conferences, and publish in a refereed advising journal. However, at the satellite campus studied, prescriptive advising dominates the advising enterprise.

Ultimately, the lack of identity or confusion about advising at MAU is not caused by lack of scholarship on normative theory or unarticulated goals and objectives, but rather systemic issues that perpetuate and exacerbate a culture of prescriptive advising. Although this study is not generalizable to other campuses, the methods used here, as well as those described in Musser (2006), could help to uncover similar issues at other postsecondary institutions. Continued study of advising systems may reveal the underlying causes for the lack of identity lamented in the advising literature.

University leadership interested in creating advising systems that support student engagement, intellectual development, and other worthy, but lofty, ideals might benefit from using systems theory to determine the ways current advising systems behave in practice. Because the behavior of a system determines the identity of the system, understanding of advising system behaviors at multiple institutions would significantly improve the efforts of those in academic advising who are working to establish a unique identity.

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